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Five Portraits

A Novel of Xanth

Piers Anthony



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Chapter 1:

Basilisk

Astrid woke early, as she often did. She left her husband sleeping in the tent and went out to look for pun virus remnants, which sometimes showed up better in the predawn light. She carried a closed vial of elixir, as all the members of her party did, at all times; it was vital to their mission. It was a tedious chore, but somebody had to do it, and they were elected.

She spied an interesting nest and went to investigate. Bees buzzed up warningly as she approached. Astrid merely pursed her lips and blew a breath of air at them, and they quickly spun out of control. After that they recognized her nature and let her be, knowing that she was not a threat to them unless they molested her.

Then she recognized the type: they were quilting bees, whose nest consisted of tiny quilts. It was surely very warm. There was obviously no virus here, for the bees were a pun that had not been eliminated.

She heard a faint panting. Sure enough, there was a pants bush, with several ripe pairs of smart-looking pants. Too smart: those were smarty pants, that when harvested would make the wearer run around madly, or could even run around on their own.

Then there was a spectacles bush with several very nice-looking spectacles ready. Astrid had an interest, as she always wore dark glasses. She folded her own glasses and pocketed them, then took a set from the bush and tried them on. Immediately she became dubious, mistrustful, and extremely cynical. Oh—these were skepticals. She put them back and tried a nice red-tinted pair. Her mood went from sulky to positive; everything looked wonderful. So these were rose-colored glasses. They would do, for now; she was happy for the temper uplift.

There were plenty of puns here, confirmation that the virus had not ravaged this section. But there could still be lurking pockets of it. She had to make sure.

She crossed a barren section where nothing much grew. This was vaguely familiar; she had once lived in country like this. In fact this could be that region, rendered less recognizable by her human perspective. There was a figure kneeling on the ground, facing away from her. Astrid approached. “Hello.”

The figure looked up. It was a woman, a large elf with pointed ears and odd four-fingered hands. “Hello.”

Then Astrid saw that before the elf woman was a marked gravesite with a plaque: JONE. “Oh, I’m sorry! I did not realize you were grieving.”

“No, that’s all right. I can’t bring Jone back.” The elf stood. “I am Jenny.”

“I am Astrid. I was just looking for pockets of pun virus to eliminate.”

Jenny stepped toward her. “I am pleased to meet you, Astrid.”

Astrid stepped back. “Please, I do not mean to seem unfriendly, but it is not safe to touch me. I am poisonous.”

Jenny stopped. “I apologize for presuming. You look lovely.”

“It—it’s a kind of curse. My appearance gives men a particular idea, but I can’t be touched.” Then she changed the awkward subject: “If I may ask, who was Jone?”

“My last baby daughter. There was a prophecy that she would one day help someone save Xanth from destruction. But then there was a horrible accident and she died. It has been some time, but I still come out to visit her grave. That is surely foolish of me, and I do not generally speak of it to others.”

“I’m sorry. I regret intruding. I grew up in this region, but did not know of this grave.”

“It is visible only when I come here,” Jenny said.

“I will let you be.” Astrid turned to go.

“That’s all right. There’s something familiar about you. Have we by chance met before?”

“I don’t think so. I think I would have remembered your—” Astrid broke off, embarrassed.

“My pointed ears? My four-fingered hands?”

“Yes. I apologize for—”

“No need. I am unique to Xanth, as perhaps you are.”

“Perhaps so,” Astrid agreed.

There was a sound in the distance. A figure loomed, running swiftly toward them. It was a giant wolf!

“Stand behind me,” Astrid said. “I will deter it.”

Jenny laughed. “No need. That is my husband.”

“Your—?”

The wolf slid to a halt, changing to a large handsome man. “Ready to go, dear?”

“Ready, dear,” Jenny agreed. “Farewell, Astrid. I’m sure I know you from somewhere.”

The man became the wolf again. Jenny leaped and landed on his back, riding him like a horse. They were off.

Astrid stood bemused. She turned to look at the grave, but it was gone, or at least hidden again. She shook her head, marveling at the odd encounter.

She moved on, discovering a trail in the shape of the letter N. It had an odor of guts. She smiled; that would be an N-Trail. Most folk would avoid it because of the unsavory smell, but such things didn’t bother her. Interesting things could sometimes be found along such trails, for those who had the stomach to follow them to their ends. Anyway, this was a very pretty trail, thanks to the rosy glasses.

It led to a lovely little glade that seemed to be a campsite. To whom did it belong?

“Hello, lovely maiden,” a somewhat gravelly voice said. “No, don’t try to retreat; the trail has been closed off behind you.”

Astrid glanced back and saw that it was true; the trail appeared to have become constricted, and there was no clear passage back. “So it seems,” she agreed, unconcerned. She removed the glasses and put her regular ones back on, because she suspected that mischief was afoot and she wanted to see things accurately. Now the clogged trail did not look nearly so nice.

“Shall we exchange introductions? I am Truculent.” He stepped out of the shadow and stood revealed as a supremely ugly troll.

“I am Astrid,” she said.

“And what brings a succulent creature like you to this ill neck of the woods, fair Astrid?”

“I am on a mission to extirpate the last remnants of the anti-pun virus that recently ravaged Xanth,” she explained. “I carry a vial of elixir that will eliminate any vestige of the foul virus.” She held it up. “We all do; we never want to discover the virus and be unable to destroy it before it spreads.”

“You all do? How many are there in your party?”

“Five lovely maidens and four males. One of us has not yet found her ideal companion.”

“That’s too bad,” Truculent said. “She is doomed to find only the worst companion.”

“I don’t think I understand,” Astrid said. Actually she was beginning to get a notion. Trolls had a

mixed reputation and a certain crude taste for human maidens. She had encountered one once, and was familiar with the type. “Are you by any ill chance speaking of yourself? I think it is fair to say she would not be interested.”

“I am, and she would not. Trolls come in assorted types. Some are noble, some build highways, and some are simply bad news. I happen to be of the latter persuasion.”

“Then why do you believe she would associate with you?”

“Because she would have no choice.”

He was a brute, all right. But she needed to be quite certain before she acted. “Maybe I am being a bit dull this morning. Surely she would have a choice.”

“She would not. Any more than you do, pretty creature.”

There it was: her appearance had turned him on, and he had mainly one thing on his brutish mind. But she argued her case, in the off-chance that she was misunderstanding his implication. “Certainly have a choice! I can associate with whomever I please, and as it happens I have a good man who loves me. I will not be taking up with the likes of you.”

“I see I need to spell it out,” Truculent said. “I have a five-stage process with respect to a tender morsel like you. First I will chase you down and catch you. That will be a slight but pleasant challenge, since you will be confined to my glade. Second I will rape you. That will be another pleasant challenge, as you will surely struggle and scream, enhancing the conquest. Third, I will kill you. That too should be fun, with blood spattering as I bite off pieces of you until you expire. Fourth I shall roast you on a spit until you are thoroughly cooked, as roasted meat is far tastier than raw flesh. Fifth, I shall eat you, swallowing your juicy tidbits and gnawing on your bones. Then I will start the process over with the four remaining girls of your party. This should make an excellent and nutritious week.”

Astrid considered briefly. “I don’t believe I favor your five-stage process. Neither will my companions.”

“I beg your pardon,” Truculent said apologetically. “Did I give you the misimpression that you had any choice in the matter?”

“I do labor under that impression. For example, what of the men of my party? They will not readily cooperate with your process.”

“I was forgetting the men,” the troll agreed. “For them I will skip the rape and still have four-fifths of the fun. That will extend my pleasure beyond a week.”

“You seem remarkably confident, considering that you don’t know what talents the members of my party may possess.”

“That merely adds the pleasure of the unknown. On rare occasion a victim does manage to escape my trap. But I believe I have closed the weaknesses, and this little arena is secure.”

“I doubt it.”

“Then shall we put it to the proof now? See if you can escape me.” The troll advanced menacingly on her.

Astrid did not retreat. “Are you sure you won’t reconsider? I do not want to harm you if you are reasonable.”

“Enough of the humor, delicious delicacy! Try to make at least a token chase of it.” He stepped closer.

“Sorry. I decline to play any part of your fell game.”

Truculent stood before her, looming over her. “I am losing my patience with you, sweet taste. Must I knock some sense into your innocent skull?”

“You can try.”

“Then take this, cute fool!” He swing his open hand and slapped her face. Her glasses flew off. He grabbed her shoulders and stared into her face. “Now will you—”

At which point he dropped dead.

Astrid shook her head. “I gave you every chance to relent,” she said sadly. “I really don’t like killing folk if there is any alternative.”

She went to pick up her fallen glasses; fortunately they were unbroken. Their heavy tint was, of course, not to protect her eyes from the sunlight, but to protect other folk from her direct stare. She didn’t want to kill anyone by accident. Not even a troll.

Well, it was time to leave this dread glade. But she discovered that the N trail remained clogged; it had not reverted at the death of the troll. The path was impenetrable.

She walked around the edge of the glade. Now she saw why the troll had thought she was trapped: the trees grew tightly around it, forming a virtual wall, and thorny vines bound them together. There was no room to walk between them. This barrier extended high up so that only a flying creature could readily escape it. Truculent Troll had wrought his arena carefully. But in his arrogance he had picked on the wrong victim.

So how was she to depart? She didn’t want to mess up anything she didn’t have to. She was just checking for signs of the pun virus, and there were none here.

Well, there was a way. In the last month she and her friends had discovered that they had been granted certain additional talents to facilitate their mission. Mainly, they could change between their most familiar forms. Astrid had not had much use for this, as her man Art preferred her in her human form. But now it seemed appropriate.

She carefully removed her sequined dress, slippers, and underwear. She formed it all into a compact bundle together with her glasses. Quite compact; she was able to tuck it under her tongue, thanks to its magic. Then she changed to her original form: a large female basilisk. She was actually an extremely pretty basilisk, but few folk cared to appreciate that, because her very ambiance was slowly lethal.

Now she circled the glade again, this time sniffing the ground. Sure enough, there was the smell of troll footprints leading to a particular spot. It looked just as tangled as the rest, but her nose said there was access. She touched it with a paw, and her digits passed through without touching. One of the trees was an illusion!

She nosed on into what turned out to be a tunnel through the twisted foliage. It wasn’t visible, but it was there. The troll must have known it well enough to use it even without seeing it. Where did it go?

Straight to a nickelpede nest. The vicious insects swarmed over it, ready to gouge out nickel-size chunks of flesh from whatever blundered into their domain. There was no way around it; the vine walls were tight on either side.

Well, she could handle nickelpedes. The taste of her flesh would kill any who bit into it, and of course her stare would wipe out any she saw. So she braced herself and marched into the nest. And through it, untouched. It was illusion too!

The path led to the mouth of a cave. It was closely barred, and locked, like a prison cell. It probably was a cell, where the troll kept his future meals. Such as maidens he had caught and raped, but not yet gotten around to killing, cooking, and eating. He would keep them alive so their meat wouldn’t spoil. They ought to be rescued.

Astrid changed back into human form. “Hello!” she called. “Is anybody in there?”

“Go away!” a faint voice replied from deep within the cave.

This was curious. “Why?” Astrid called back.

~~“This is the lair of a troll. Go away before he catches you and adds you to our number. It is not safe here, especially for maidens, which you sound like. We are doomed, but you can still save yourself if you flee quickly.”~~

“I will not flee,” Astrid called. “I have come to rescue you. But these bars balk me. How may I open the gate?”

“We’ll try to tell you,” the voice called. Now there was a scurrying as the captives emerged from the depth of the cave. They were goblin maidens, small and lovely. They paused as they saw her. “You’re a nymph!”

Astrid realized that she had not thought to put her human clothing back on. Nymphs were lovely and largely empty-headed; all most of them did was run nude, scream cutely, and kick their feet high showing off their pretty legs. Few remembered their yesterdays or were aware of their tomorrows; they lived strictly in the present. No ordinary nymph would attempt to rescue captives, because a nymph’s attention span was too short to focus on such a task for more than a few seconds.

“Not exactly,” Astrid said. “I merely forgot my clothes.” She spat out her compact ball, opened it up, and donned her clothing and dark glasses.

“Oh!” a gobliness with lovely reddish brown hair exclaimed. “You’re human!”

Wrong again, but Astrid decided not to clarify that aspect at the moment; it was usually more trouble than it was worth. “Close enough. I am Astrid, traveler.”

“I am Ginger Goblin, captive.”

“Hello, Ginger. I am glad to meet you. Now how can I open this gate?”

“The lock is magic. Only the dread troll can open it.” Ginger hesitated. “Who may come upon us at any moment.”

“No danger of that,” Astrid said.

“How can you be sure? He’s one mean brute.”

“Because he is dead.”

There was a brief silence. “Are you sure?” Ginger asked uncertainly. “He might be playing possum to better trap you, because you’re very much his type.”

“His type?” Astrid asked sharply.

“Luscious. He would want to ravish and eat you.”

“No, he is definitely dead.”

“How can you be sure? Because if he catches you—”

Astrid became impatient. “Because I killed him. I’m a basilisk.”

The goblins eeked faintly and fell back, terrified.

“Oh come on,” Astrid said. “I’m not here to hurt you. That’s why I put on the glasses. Truculent Troll mistook me for a morsel, and attacked me, knocked off my glasses, and I looked him in the face and killed him. It was self defense. Now I just want to undo some of the damage he did, such as by freeing you to return to your homes. I’m a basilisk, but also a woman. I care about the welfare of maidens.”

The goblins inched cautiously back to the gate. “We’re sorry,” Ginger said. “It’s a bad time for us. Each day he takes one of us to—to—”

“To rape and eat. I know. But that’s over. We just need to get this gate unlocked.”

“We can’t help you there,” Ginger said. “If we knew how to unlock it, we would have done so ourselves and escaped.”

That made sense. Astrid signed. “Then I’ll have to summon help. This may get complicated.”

“Complicated?”

“You’ll see.” The Astrid braced herself. “Metria,” she murmured.

A small black cloud appeared. “Did I hear my nomenclature?”

“Your what?” Astrid asked. The demoness insisted on going through the ritual, and since Astrid needed her help, she had to comply.

“Terminology, language, word, figure, identifier, handle—”

“Name?”

“Whatever,” the cloud agreed crossly.

“Yes, you heard your name,” Astrid said. “I killed a troll, and now want to rescue his captives, but they are magically locked in. Can you arrange to get Pewter here? He should be able to handle this.”

“Why not just pick the lock?”

“I don’t know how. Do you?”

The cloud expanded and formed into a sultry female figure with barely enough clothing to avoid freaking out any males in the vicinity. Fortunately there were none at the moment. “Oh, sure. I pick my nose; a lock should be cleaner.”

“Then do it, please.”

Metria’s finger went to her nose.

“The lock!” Astrid snapped.

“Oh. Why didn’t you say so?”

Ginger nodded slowly. She was catching on why this was likely to be complicated.

The demoness examined the lock. She put her finger to it. There was a crackle as a spark jumped, and she jerked back. “This is a troll lock!”

“Yes. Can you pick it?”

“Not without being electrocuted. Only trolls can handle troll locks.”

“Could Pewter handle it?”

Metria nodded. “He might. Too bad he’s not here.”

“I have a phenomenal idea,” Astrid said patiently. “Why don’t you pop back to the camp and tell him about this, and ask him to come here to deal with it?”

“What kind of idea?”

“Fantastic, extraordinary, remarkable, superlative, spectacular—”

“Grate?”

Astrid was taken aback. “Grate?”

“Maybe I misspelled it.”

“Great!” Astrid said. “Yes, that’s it. You’re a genius.”

Metria looked slightly suspicious that she was being mocked. “Technically I’m closer to a genie than a genius, but it will do. I’ll go fetch Pewter.” She popped off.

“Thank you, screwball,” Astrid said to the dissipating smoke.

“I heard that!” the last wisp said.

“Oh, bleep!” Astrid swore.

“We have heard of Metria,” Ginger said. “She’s always mischief.”

“She’s a member of our party,” Astrid said. “She does mean well, in her fashion. It just can be a trial at times working with her.”

“We appreciate that.”

Soon the cloud reappeared. “Tiara is on her way.”

“Tiara? But it’s Pewter we need here at the moment.”

“But he can’t fly. Tiara can.”

Astrid counted mentally to ten. It hardly helped. “I wonder whether she will be willing to go back to fetch Pewter.”

“No need.”

“No need?”

“Superfluous, pointless, redundant—”

“Why is there no need to go back to fetch Pewter?”

“Because she’s already bringing him.”

Astrid counted from eleven to twenty. That didn’t help much either. “Thank you.”

“Always glad to help,” the demoness said sunnily.

In due course Tiara appeared. Her wild fair hair was gathered and wound around her midsection, in flotation supporting her like an inner tube. She had fins on her hands and feet, and was efficiently swimming through the air, as she had learned how to do in the past month. But she seemed to be alone. Astrid kept her mouth shut, afraid to inquire.

Tiara circled over the forest, spied them, and spiraled gently down, her skirt flapping in the breeze. She landed fairly neatly. She had bright blue eyes, a red cherry mouth, nice features, and a firm slender body. “Hello, Astrid,” she said brightly as her hair shortened and formed back into her namesake tiara. “We wondered what you were up to.”

“I had a run-in with a hungry troll. Now we need to unlock the troll’s gate to let out his captives.”

“Ah. That must be why you need Com Pewter.”

“Yes. He has a way with locks.”

Tiara removed her hand-fins, reached into her small backpack and fished out what looked like a potato chip with the letter C printed on one side, and the letter P on the other side. She brought it to her mouth and kissed it. “Wake, CP.”

The chip expanded, forming into an android with a face painted on the front of the head. It was of course a computer chip. “Thank you, maiden.”

“For the ride?” Tiara asked.

“That, too.”

Astrid smiled. Theoretically the machine was immune to the charms of pretty girls, but that was evidently changing. Com Pewter was no prince, but the kiss had revived him regardless.

“Here is the lock,” Astrid told Pewter, indicating the barred gate. “Can you open it?”

Pewter considered the gate without touching it. “This is a sophisticated setup. The lock is protected by an invisible magnetic shell that will short-circuit me if I touch it. The troll surely had it keyed to his identity alone. We need to eliminate the shell first.”

“How do we do that?”

“One good bash by a nonmetallic object should do it.”

“Then I think we need Ease and Kandy.”

“We do,” Pewter agreed.

“I will fetch them,” Tiara agreed. Her hair grew long again. She wrapped it around her middle, donned the hand-fins, and took off. There was almost but not quite a flash of panties before she leveled out and swam forward. She was still learning to manage such details. Trousers would have solved that problem, but Tiara considered them unfeminine. Soon she was gone.

“How come a common garden-variety troll has such a fancy security system?” Metria asked.

“I can answer that,” Ginger responded from inside the cave. “My friends and I were out foraging for flowers, and there were some pretty ones in the glade. We didn’t realize that it was the troll’s trap.”

He pounced on us and we were helpless to resist. He told us that he had made a deal with his trollway building cousins to provide one or more pretty girls to serve their needs. When they come to collect, any of us who survive will be given to them to serve as slaves. We hoped they would come soon, because they can't be worse than Truculent."

Astrid did not like the smell of this. "What kind of slaves?"

"We don't know, but we can guess. The difference is that they probably won't cook and eat us, after. They're more civilized."

Ideas of civilization evidently differed. Still, the trollway trolls were a higher class, and surely better to deal with. "Well, that deal is terminated," Astrid said. "We'll free you so you can go home."

"We appreciate that."

But now there was a heavy tramping along the hidden trail. Trolls!

"Let's hope for their sake that they are reasonable," Pewter said to Astrid. "If not, you know what to do."

"I do," she agreed grimly, touching her dark glasses.

The trolls came to stand before the cave. There were three of them, each uglier than the others. "What have we here?" their evident leader demanded.

Astrid stepped forward. "Let's exchange introductions. I am Astrid. Truculent Troll attacked me and I had to defend myself, as you may have seen in the glade."

"We did," the troll said. "I am Truman Troll and these are my henchmen. How did you manage to overcome Truculent?"

"I am a basilisk in human form."

"He knows better than to mess with a basilisk!"

"He did not give me much of a chance to clarify my nature. He was too busy clarifying his own five-stage process."

Truman nodded. "That does sound like him. Why have you not long-since departed this vicinity?"

"We mean to free Truculent's captives so they can go home. They have suffered more than enough already."

"Those captives devolve to us, now that Truculent is dead. We have uses for them."

"You shall not have them."

"This is troll business. There are precedents."

"It became my business when Truculent attacked me. Any deals he may have made ended with his death."

"We do not agree. The terms of the deal extend to the heirs and assigns."

"We do not agree with your interpretation."

"Do we agree that an altercation between our kind and your kind could become mutually difficult?"

"Our kinds have normally left each other alone," Astrid agreed.

Truman exchanged a glance or three with his companions, then stared down at her. "Then it seems we have a problem." He closed his massive fists as the two henchmen donned hoods that would prevent her from staring directly at their faces. That would provide them only partial protection, and inhibit their vision. Still, it increased their chances of dispatching her before she dispatched them. It seemed they had clashed with basilisks before.

Astrid touched her glasses. She could handle trolls, even experienced ones. But it was chancy; she could not be sure of taking out all three before one got to her with a club. They were of course aware that they would take losses. "I hope it can be amicably resolved."

Truman smiled without humor. "So do I. Do you have a proposal?"

“I do,” Pewter said.

Truman glanced at him. “And you are?”

“Com Pewter, a smart machine allied with Astrid. You do not know my capabilities.”

“Oh, we do, Pewter,” Truman said. “Your iconoclasm is well known. But your power is limited to your immediate vicinity.”

“You are standing on the verge of that vicinity. You will enter it if you clash with Astrid.”

Truman nodded. “Excellent point. What is your proposal?”

“Surely the goblins have some troll captives, saved for similar purposes as you save goblins. How about a captive exchange?”

“We prefer a good old-fashioned raid and heads-bashing.”

“Which would cost you the lives of the captives, making the raid in that respect pointless.”

“So it would, unfortunately. But goblin males, in contrast with their females, are surly brutes not much known for negotiation. We would be at war before we came to terms.”

“Unless a basilisk served as intermediary.”

This time the troll’s smile had humor. “Well now! That notion appeals to me. Let’s see what offer. This will require a dialogue with the captives. Shall we make a truce for this hour?”

“Granted,” Pewter said.

“Granted,” Astrid agreed. Trolls were dark and dangerous, but they did honor truces.

Truman’s fists unclenched, and the henchmen’s hoods came off. They knew that machines and basilisks also honored truces.

“May I say, Astrid, that you are one extremely fetching creature in this form,” Truman said. “It is a pleasure to be near—but not too near—you.”

“Thank you.” At least he was polite about the idea the sight of her gave him.

Truman squatted down to peer into the barred cave. “Goblins, we are in negotiation phase. Are there any troll captives in your home mound?”

“Three,” Ginger said. “But we can’t say how long they will survive.”

“They were alive when you left?”

“Yes. But the female was stripped and tied down for the benefit of—you know.”

“Yes. We treat captives similarly. It is to mutual advantage for us to arrange an exchange.”

“Yes,” Ginger agreed faintly.

The troll inspected the lock. “That’s one of ours, yes, keyed to Truculent. No one else can touch it without getting electrocuted. You have a way to deal with it?”

“We believe so,” Pewter said. “Assistance is on the way.”

Truman turned to Astrid. “Now let’s go see the goblins. May I offer you a lift?”

“That is surely faster,” Astrid agreed.

“Climb into my knapsack.”

She got behind him and did so. Then he stood. “Remain here,” he told the henchmen. And to Astrid, “Trust, but verify.”

“Agreed.”

Then the troll forged into the brush, bashing out his own trail. In a remarkably brief time they reached the goblin mound.

The goblins surged out, brandishing weapons. “Ho! Fresh meat!” their leader cried.

“Not so,” Truman said. “I come to negotiate.”

“Negotiate, negotiate,” the goblin said. “You were a fool to come into our power, poop for brains.”

“I bring with me a basilisk.”

“Nice bluff, moron! We don’t see any—” He paused.

Astrid had changed to her natural form, gazing out and around from the knapsack, not looking at anyone directly. The goblins shrank away, well knowing that form.

“As I was saying,” Truman said. “We have three goblin girls from your mound as captives. We will exchange them for your three troll captives. Do we have a deal?”

“The bleep!” the goblin chief swore.

Astrid lowered her gaze. She looked at a tied sheep they were probably saving for the evening meal. It looked her way, and fell dead.

“Do we have a deal?” Truman repeated.

The goblins looked at the sheep. They quailed, realizing that this was no bluff. “Deal,” the chief said, disgruntled.

“We shall return in due course with the captives,” Truman said. “In the interim, you will bring out your captives and have them ready here. Then we will exchange.” He paused meaningfully. “Should anything go wrong, my companion might be annoyed. You wouldn’t like her when she’s annoyed.”

The goblins quailed again. The last thing they wanted was an angry basilisk marauding through their mound.

Truman turned and forged back through the brush. Astrid returned to her human form. “You have an effective way with words, Astrid,” he remarked.

“Thank you.” She hadn’t said anything, but her threat of a glare had been enough. That was his point.

When they reached the cave, Tiara was just arriving, swimming through the air with the man called Ease on her back as if riding a dolphin. Her hair had to be struggling to float them both but was managing. He waved. Then he did a double take. “Trolls!” He drew his trusty wooden board and brandished it threateningly.

“We are in truce, unfortunately,” Truman said. “But after our business here is done, if you wish to try your board against my club, I will be glad to accommodate you.”

“He’s right,” Astrid called. “We made a truce. We are friends for this hour. No fighting.”

“Oh, bleep,” Ease said, lowering the board as Tiara landed. He jumped off her back.

“Here is the situation,” Pewter told Ease. “I need to unlock this lock to free the goblin captives, but it is protected by an invisible shell. Kindly bash apart that shell.”

“Sure,” Ease said. It was his talent to make things easy. He swung the board at the lock. There was a sharp crack, and a small explosion of sparks, and the formerly invisible fragments of the shell dropped to the ground.

“Thank you,” Pewter said. “Now let me concentrate. This may take a little time.”

“We have made a deal to exchange captives, goblins for trolls,” Astrid said. “It’s a situation I blundered into, but it is working out.”

Ease turned away. He touched the board to the ground, and it became a lovely young woman with dark eyes and luxuriant dark hair. “And hello Kandy,” Astrid said.

Both the goblins and the trolls were startled. “What just happened here?” Truman asked.

“I have the ability to change forms between human and board,” Kandy explained. “Just as Astrid changes between human and basilisk. When I’m the board, I make sure Ease’s aim is good and his strike effective.” She rubbed her neck. “Though I must admit that charge on the shell gave me a jolt.”

“It occurs to me that you folk are no ordinary group,” Truman said.

“We’re a special mission to eliminate the last of the anti-pun virus,” Kandy explained. “To that end we have been granted certain additional abilities. We are a bit unusual.”

“So it seems,” the troll agreed, glancing at Astrid, Kandy, and Tiara. “Are all the females of your party as pretty as the three of you?”

Demoness Metria appeared. “Yes.”

“And a demoness!” Truman said. “The surprises keep coming.”

“Surprises can be fun,” Metria said, inhaling so that her décolletage threatened to tear loose and float away.

“I am curious how a basilisk came to associate with a human party, and a demoness, a machine, a girl who floats on her hair, and a board woman,” Truman said. “Not that it’s any of my business, which makes it even more intriguing.”

“We’re curious too,” Ginger said. “It’s not our business either.”

“Well, that would be a chapter-length personal narrative,” Astrid said. “I wouldn’t want to bore you to distraction with a dull literary flashback.”

“As it happens, this lock threatens to require a chapter-length effort,” Pewter said.

“So we’re stuck for the time anyway,” Ginger said.

Truman and his henchmen settled down on the ground. “Bore us,” he said.

The others settled similarly. What could she do? Astrid began to speak.

Chapter 2:

Flashback

Astrid Basilisk-Cockatrice was the daughter of anonymous parents who had wiled away a dull minute by generating her on a warm compost pile, then gone their own deadly ways, never to see her or each other again. Why should they? It was their nature to hate all other creatures, including their own kind. They had fought over possession of the resting site, and finally settled it by sharing it for that brief purpose. In minutes they were both days away and not looking back, leaving her to hatch alone. She had to fend for herself from the outset, as all female basilisks and male cockatrices did. She had no particular difficulty, as her very nearness wilted plants and stunned animals, and her direct stare into any creature's eyes was instantly lethal. So she had plenty of spoiling food to sustain her, and was never in any real danger.

Yet she was not completely satisfied with this deadly dull life. It took her some time to figure out what was bothering her. She covertly observed other creatures—she had to hide to do it, because they sensibly fled in horror and/or terror the moment they saw or winded or heard her—and noted that while they too foraged or hunted for food, and generated manure, and fought and slept, they also associated in pairs or even small groups. Sometimes they became very friendly with each other. The mating part was obvious, but why did they continue to be together after it was accomplished?

She realized in time that they associated because they liked each other and enjoyed interacting on more or less continual basis. This was foreign to her nature, it as she studied it, it began to appeal to her. She wanted to be friends with others, to achieve love, and to have romance. But this was of course impossible. If she encountered a cockatrice he would want to be with her only one minute and never again. That simply was not enough.

She finally concluded that she would never achieve her dreams as a basilisk. Her kind simply were not loving creatures. Yet her impossible desire remained. What could she do?

It occurred to her that the humans might know. They associated with each other all the time, and even made houses so they could live constantly together. She knew better than to approach a human; they were as wary of her kind as any creature was, and somewhat more effective in attacking. She had had a couple of narrow escapes. No creature could overcome her in close combat, but humans used spears, arrows, and thrown stones that were effective from a distance.

However, she managed to spy on one human family by burying herself in compost close behind their house. That not only hid her, it masked her deadly body odor, and she was able to overhear their dialogues in the house. She remained for many hours at a time, mostly listening. In this manner she slowly learned their language. She couldn't speak it, because her mouth and tongue were wrong, but she came to understand it.

One day the man and woman discussed something truly remarkable. It seemed that there was a grumpy old human or gnome called the Good Magician who answered questions for a fee. The fee was a year's service to him at his castle, or the equivalent. Querents, as they were called, constantly sought to bother him with Questions. He didn't like to be bothered, so he had set up his castle to force anyone approaching to navigate three difficult challenges before they could get inside. This significantly cut down the number. Those few who made it in got Answers and paid with their Services, and that was

that.

~~That was what she should do. Maybe the Good Magician would be able to solve her problem. In fact, maybe he would have a spell to enable her to become human so that she could then experience everything she was missing as a basilisk. The more she considered it, the more it appealed to her. She would do it.~~

Thus it was that she set out for the Good Magician's Castle. She had ascertained where it was. In fact there were enchanted paths leading right to it. Unfortunately she could not use those paths, because they were spelled to exclude dangerous creatures like her. But she followed alongside them, and was duly guided. In due course she reached it, or at least a place in the deep forest that enabled her to gaze at it.

It was beautiful in the human manner, with lofty turrets, a crenelated surrounding wall, and a circular moat that featured a handsome moat monster. There was a drawbridge across the moat, but at the moment it was drawn up. That would be no problem for her; she could swim well enough, and the moat monster would know better than to try to bother her. But she was sure it would not be that easy. She had learned that the Good Magician always seemed to know who was coming—he was after all the Magician of Information—and prepared Challenges tailored to the specific Querent. Also, that the person's magic talent was not effective here. So she would likely face problems that balked a basilisk without being able to kill them with a glance. That could be awkward.

Well, she would find out. She emerged from the forest and advanced on the castle.

A man came to intercept her before she even reached the moat. His hand hovered near his hip, where a squat mechanical device was hooked to his belt. "Draw, stranger," he said.

Astrid halted. He wanted her to draw a picture? That was odd. But she could oblige him. She scraped a section of ground clear with her tail, then used a paw to draw a little picture of a nest up in the top of a tall tree.

The gunman paused. "I'll be bleeped," he said. "I can read that. You're saying 'High,' meaning 'Hi.' Well, hi to you too, basilisk. But that isn't the kind of drawing I meant."

It wasn't? Astrid looked at him curiously.

"Look, Bask, I'm a troubleshooter. I shoot at trouble, banishing it. And you're certainly trouble. The worst kind, because you kill folk with your stare. If it weren't for the counter-spell nullifying your deadly gaze and smell, I'd be in deep bleep already. But I'm giving you a fair chance. I mean either draw your gun faster than I can draw mine, so you can plug me first, or get out of here, defeated. Otherwise I'll plug you. It won't actually be lethal, because the magic protects you to that extent, but it will knock you out, and when you recover you'll be far away from here with a geis on you to stay the bleep away from this castle. Now do you understand? This is a Challenge. It's my job to get rid of you so you won't bother the Good Magician with your stupid Question. Got it now?"

Geis? She had not encountered this word before.

"It's a magical obligation," the man explained. "Locks you in so you can't violate it."

He knew what she was thinking? This was scary.

"So are you going to draw or flee, moron?" the Troublesooter demanded.

She might have been inclined to turn tail and depart, as this Castle business was more complicated than she had anticipated. But there was something about his attitude that annoyed her. So she reversed her mental course and decided to plow on through. Obviously she couldn't draw her gun, as she had no gun and no hand suitable to hold it. This challenge was completely unfair in that respect.

There had to be a way. That was part of the lore she had overhead: there was always a way. She just had to be smart enough to find it.

She looked quickly around. All she saw was a few bright coins scattered on the ground. She knew, again from her eavesdropping, that human folk valued coins, though they really had little or no use for them. Could this be a way?

“You’ve had enough time, compost beast,” the troubleshooter said. “If you don’t turn tail this instant, I’ll plug you.”

Astrid turned tail in that instant, forestalling the gunman’s action. But she wasn’t fleeing. She was going for the coins.

The nearest was a plugged nickel. She could tell because she smelled the nickel metal, and there was a hole through its center. The gunman must have plugged it earlier, ruining its value. Evidently he liked plugging things, just for the bleep of it.

She began to get a glimmer of the beginning of a notion. Just how much did he like plugging coins? Especially if it became a challenge?

She found a Heaven Cent, a truly beautiful little coin. She swept it up with a paw and hurled it high in the air toward the gunman.

Sure enough, he whirled, drew his gun, and fired. The coin rang as his bullet struck it, knocking it right out of the air. He was certainly a good shot. That might actually be his weakness.

She found a Heaven Nickel and swept it up similarly. She couldn’t grasp and hold an object in her paw, but she could throw it by sweeping it out of the dirt. The Nickel arced high in the air.

The Troubleshooter plugged it, again scoring perfectly.

Good enough. Astrid found several more coins, and crammed them into her mouth. They were colorful and dirty, and some were truly foul, but she could handle that. When she had them all, she ran rapidly forward, toward the Castle.

“Hey!” the Troubleshooter called, drawing his gun.

Astrid spat out a Heaven Quarter and swiped it into the air behind her. The gunman whirled and shot at it, plugging it right through the center. But meanwhile Astrid was running. When the Troubleshooter reoriented and aimed at her again, she spat out a Heaven Dollar and heaved it up, and he plugged it. She followed with a Hell Cent. That one went up in vile smoke when plugged. Then a Hell Nickel, and Hell Quarter. The gunman got them all.

And she was at the moat.

“Dang,” the Troubleshooter cursed. “You diverted me and got through. Nice going, Bask.”

It seemed she had navigated the First Challenge. So how was it relevant to her situation, as she had never messed with coins or guns before? Well, it had forced her to use her mind instead of her lethal stare, and practice in that could be an advantage when interacting with humans. She was pleased with herself.

She didn’t even need the Hell Dollar, so she made a careful swipe with her paw and skipped it across the moat. The moat monster watched it but knew better than to snap it up.

But her glee was soon doused by a far more negative reflection as she gazed into the water of the moat. So she had made it through one Challenge, really mostly by sheer luck. What made her think she could handle two more? And if by some mischance she did, why did she think the Good Magician could or would actually help her? This whole thing was ridiculous!

As if echoing her thoughts, she heard sonorous music. It seemed to be coming from the blue water of the moat, and it was turning everything else blue: the sandy bank, the motley plants growing on it, even her own body. In fact it was the Blues! She had heard humans speaking of them: music that really depressed people.

She must have activated it by skipping the Hell Dollar, signaling her completion of the first

Challenge. So could she change it? *Green!* she thought. And lo, the water turned green, and the music changed. So did the sand bank and plants, all becoming deep green. Now she felt very environmental friendly, wanting to help the whole natural environment.

She tried again, thinking *Yellow*. Not only did the environment assume a yellow cast, she felt very afraid.

Pink, she thought. The color changed, and so did the music, both becoming very soft and feminine.

So she could change colors, but remained bound to them. This wasn't getting her past what must be the Second Challenge. Playing with it wasn't enough; she needed to counter it. But how?

Well, in the prior Challenge she finally made it work for her. How could she make this music work for her? Music was for listening and dancing, and of course a lizard couldn't dance.

Or could it? She had four legs, but why should dancing be restricted to two legs? She could dance to music, in her fashion. She thumped her legs, forming a cadence, a beat. The music aligned, becoming sprightly. She was doing it!

Except that she needed to get across the moat. Dancing was not helping there. She could swim, but she suspected that this would not be allowed. She tried wading into the water. Sure enough, she did not float; she remained on the lake floor. She would have to hold her breath a long time to cross it—far longer than she was able. She had to find a magical or punnish way. Maybe a music and dance way.

Dance puns. What about *Atten-dance?* *Abun-dance?* *Depen-dance?* Those did not seem promising.

Then it came to her: *Ascen-dance!* A dance that made a person rise.

The thought brought the music. It became uplifting. She danced, and her feet were light. She moved out onto the water, her whole body almost floating. Her feet touched the water and did not sink in. She was dancing on the water. *Ascent-dance-sea!*

She danced on across the moat. Halfway across she passed the moat monster, whose green head oriented on her. She paused, smirking—and sank into the water.

She scrambled to resume the cadence, or *ca-dance*. She fought to recover the music. She managed to get them back and resume her progress. Distractions were deadly! She could have drowned trying to annoy the moat monster. That was an inadvertent lesson, but worth remembering.

She made it to the inner bank and flopped on the sand, panting. *Ascen-dancing* was hard work! But she had made it through the Second Challenge.

Soon she perked up and looked around. There was a space between the moat and the outer castle wall. There were a number of gates in the wall, each open and offering access to the interior. So where was the Third Challenge? Astrid did not trust this. Suppose she entered, and the gate slammed shut behind her, and it was the wrong access? The Challenge might be to figure out the correct gate before using any of them.

She walked along the space, eying each gate in turn. They seemed similar, but they did have different names printed on each. She was able to read them because during her spying on the human family, the child had been given exercises in reading. He was saying each word, then writing it with a stick in the dirt. Watching him practice had taught her the written form too. In fact, on occasion he had trouble with his spelling, doing it different ways for the same word. One day the word he spoke was *Feud*, but he spelled it *Food*. He was doubtful, but could not get it right. That bothered her. Finally she had quietly emerged from her hiding place and shown herself to him. He was too young to recognize her deadly nature, so he was not afraid; he took her for a large lizard, which technically she was. She was careful not to look him directly in the eye. Instead she took a deep and obvious breath and held it. So he imitated her, holding his own breath, glad for the distraction from his dull lesson. He took it for a game. That protected him from her odor. She walked to the dirt pad, wiped out his word,

and scratched in the correct one. Then she had hastily retreated to a safe range, letting out her breath. He brightened as he let out his own breath, recognizing the correction. Thereafter when he had a word problem, he would signal her by holding his breath, and she would correct it for him. It was a convenient collaboration. She was in effect his make-believe playmate, and that satisfied them both. But all too soon he had grown up and moved on into the things of his own realm, like human girls, and she did not see him anymore. It was sad, but had left her with the ability to read, which now was proving useful.

Not that the printed names were very helpful. They were things like CONJU, ABRO, ARRO, CONGRE, DERO, FRI, FUMI, MITI, and SEGRE. These words had not been in the boy's lexicon, and she was not sure they made any sense. Of course gates could be named anything, sensible or nonsensical, but what was the point of having them in a Challenge if they were meaningless? So she pondered, and cogitated, and considered, and just plain thought. She was not about to try any of them until she understood their nature.

So she walked on, and came to a woman putting together mechanical men from a pile of metal rods, wires, and silly putty. Was she here for a reason?

The woman spied her. "Why, hello, basilisk," she said cheerily. "Have you lost your way?"

Astrid shook her head no, but then changed her mind. Maybe she *was* lost.

"Well, maybe I can help," the woman said. "I am Ann Droid. I assemble and control assorted robots. This one will be RX, a doctor machine. Another will be RNA, a geneticist. Every robot is R-something or other. They can be very useful in specialized situations."

Astrid did not know what a doctor or geneticist was, so stood mute.

"Oh, I forgot!" Ann said. "You're an animal you can't speak. Let me fix that for the moment." She rummaged in her pile and came up with a small panel. "Hold this and think your words, and it will speak them for you."

Astrid accepted the panel, holding it awkwardly in her mouth. "Like this?" it asked. She was so surprised that she dropped it on the ground.

"Yes, like that, of course," Ann said. "It's a translator. I'm sure you could speak on your own if you had the mouth for it. This merely facilitates communication."

Astrid picked up the device again. "So it seems," it said. "I am Astrid."

Ann eyed her thoroughly. "I must say, you are a remarkably fetching example of your species, Astrid. The cockatrices must be constantly after you."

"They're a nuisance," Astrid agreed via the machine. "I have had to glare several of them off."

Ann laughed. "Human women do much the same thing, though our glares are more figurative than literal. The typical man wants only one thing, whereas we prefer an acquaintance that endures for more than one minute."

Astrid was coming to like this friendly woman. "We do," she agreed.

"So what can I do for you, Astrid?"

This might be awkward. "Are you a Challenge?"

Ann laughed. "By no means! I am merely part of the setting, as it were."

"I am having trouble figuring out what the Challenge is. All I see are mysteriously labeled gates."

Ann shrugged. "Doubtless it will come to you in due course."

So she was not going to help. Possibly she was merely a distraction. "Thank you," Astrid said, and set down the translator.

"You're welcome, Astrid. I hope you figure it out soon."

There were no more gates beyond this section, just the blank wall. Astrid walked back by them,

rereading each label. There had to be some clue to their meaning. An array of ten gates with odd names. What was the clue?

She came to the first gate in the row, labeled INVESTI. Investi-gate.

A bright bulb flashed above her head. Investigate! It made a word after all.

She walked back, adding the gate's name to each one. Conjugate, Abrogate, Arrogate, Congregate, Derogate, Frigate, Fumigate, Mitigate, Segregate. They all made sense on their own terms.

Good enough. Now which was the proper one to take? Probably Investigate, as that was what she was doing. She walked to that one and started through.

And it slammed closed, just missing her snoot. No access here. So she must have guess wrong.

She tried the next, Congregate. It slammed shut also.

She tried the others. Each shut her unkindly out.

It seemed she had not, after all, solved the Challenge, merely one part of it.

She returned to Ann, who remained busy with her robots. The translator remained where she could take it. She picked it up in her mouth. "I figured out the gates. Each of their names is a prelude to Gate. But they still won't let me pass."

"Perhaps the naming scheme is only part of the Challenge."

"Yes. But I have yet to figure out the rest of it. Are you sure you're not part of it?"

"I am merely part of the setting."

Then a second bulb flashed. The answer would be part of the setting.

"I saw that flash," Ann said.

"You're not the Challenge, you're the solution," Astrid said. "You're here for a reason."

Ann shrugged. "Perhaps."

"Those gates are obviously self-willed. That means they are machines. Robots. And you make robots. You must have made the gates."

"Possibly."

"And you can control them. You can let me through."

"Why should I do that?"

"Because I have figured it out, and you are a nice person, the kind I would like to be, and I am asking."

Ann laughed. "There is something about your phrasing that appeals to me. Select a gate."

"No, please, you select one. I want the one you choose for me."

Ann nodded. "You know, you're smarter than the average basilisk, and a good deal nicer. Take the Mitigate."

"Thank you." Astrid set down the translator and went to the Mitigate. This time it did not slam on her snoot. She entered the castle.

A woman met her inside. "Welcome, Astrid. I am Wira, the Good Magician's daughter-in-law. He will see you now."

Just like that, Astrid was in the Magician's cramped study. He was there, poring over a huge tome. "Basilisk, I can change your form but not your nature. I can make your form human, but you will still be a deadly creature whose very nearness is death to most others. Are you sure this is what you want?"

Astrid was not at all sure, but neither did she want to return to her natural haunts. So she nodded. She wanted the change.

"There is another thing. Has it occurred to you to wonder why I am bothering with you, considering that you are a deadly animal most folk seek to exterminate?"

That had not occurred to her, but now that he mentioned it, she did wonder.

“It is because you are no ordinary animal. You have a soul.”

That had never even attempted to occur to her. How was this possible? Everyone knew that only human beings or those deviously related to them had souls. She was sure she had absolutely no human lineage.

“A night mare was transporting a lost soul to the dream realm when she got distracted by an idea for a truly horrendous bad dream and dropped it. It rolled into a hole and landed on you, were you were sleeping in your burrow. That put it beyond her recovery and she had to move on, chastened. Souls are immeasurably precious, at least to those who have them. Thereafter you were a souled creature, though you did not know it. That is why you became dissatisfied with your normal life. That is why you finally concluded that you would rather be human than lizard. You already had the essence of humanity. Your soul would not let you rest in peace.”

Astrid gazed at him with hooded eyes so as not to hurt him. What he said explained so much! She was indeed too gentle to be a good basilisk. “But souls don’t accept just anybody,” she protested. “That soul should have bounced off me and waited for a better host. I’m a basilisk!”

“You are correct. Souls can be quite choosy. But evidently this one saw in you the potential for it to achieve its full flowering, so it accepted you. It may even have sought you out.”

“Sought a basilisk?”

“A dubious business, to be sure. Let’s hope it didn’t make a mistake.”

“I will try to live up to its expectation,” she said humbly.

“So I must facilitate your conversion to humanity,” the Good Magician concluded. “Now you know why.”

She did indeed. What a revelation!

“MareAnn will give you a potion,” he said. “You will still owe me a Service.”

She nodded again, accepting the terms.

“This way,” Wira said, leading her back down the dusky spiral stairway to the ground floor.

They came to a comfortable family room. A woman vaguely reminiscent of a pony met them there. “I am MareAnn, Designated Wife of the Month. Are you sure you want that potion? It will enable you to speak, if you know our language, and Ann Droid says you do, but—”

Astrid nodded without looking directly at her. MareAnn presented her with a sealed vial. Astrid took it between her front paws, nipped off the cap, and gulped it down.

The change was immediate. Her proportions shifted, with her limbs stretching out and her torso condensing, becoming distinctly lumpy. Her tail shrank until it no longer seemed to exist. Her snout shrank into her face. Her scales faded out. What a disaster!

“Now your form is human,” MareAnn said. “You should be able to stand on your hind feet if you try. But first put this hood on over your head.”

Astrid understood why. She took the hood, which was translucent so she could see out but would distort her gaze so that she would not accidentally kill someone with her stare. Then she slowly and awkwardly climbed to her feet. Her balance was precarious, but she was able to maintain it.

“You are a remarkably pretty semblance of a woman,” MareAnn said. “The potion changes forms, but keeps the peripheral aspects. You were a very pretty basilisk.”

“Thank you,” Astrid said. And she paused, realizing that she had just spoken her first human word aloud.

“You see, you can do it,” MareAnn said encouragingly. “However, there will still be a lot more for you to learn before you can safely go out among humans. We’ll give you a room to yourself and I will help you all I can.”

And so it was. MareAnn had a thing for animals, especially equines, but also for others, and she made sure that Astrid was comfortable and well treated. She spent many hours and days talking with Astrid, acquainting her with human conventions and foibles. One of these was clothing. Basilisks didn't use it, but humans did, so she had to wear a loose robe when she remembered to. It hardly mattered here, because no one entered this castle casually.

Most importantly, MareAnn became Astrid's first human friend. Astrid had never had one before, and found that she liked it very well.

"The Good Magician says that you will need three best friends to fulfill your mission in life," MareAnn said. "I am the first, but I am not enough."

"You seem like enough to me," Astrid said. "I am only newly acquainted with friendship, and don't know what a best friend would be. Also, I have no idea of a mission in life."

"With luck you will learn."

Then one night MareAnn came to her with a mission. "You have an opportunity to perform your Service for the Good Magician in what I hope is a compatible manner. A man has come who will be going out on a perhaps dangerous mission. He will need a bodyguard: someone who can readily dispatch a monster or attacking human when that is necessary."

"I can do that," Astrid agreed. "But a human man—I would not know how to comport myself in his presence."

"True. Fortunately he has a female companion, though he doesn't know it. She will guide you."

"That would help. But why doesn't he know it?"

"Because she is a wooden board by day. It's a curse put on her by a wishing well. Well, not actually a curse; rather it's a devious way of granting her wish. But it seems much like a curse. So she animates mostly at night, when he is asleep."

"I'm not sure I would be adept at handling a situation like this."

"Please, Astrid. This is your chance to go out among the human kind with some appropriate guidance. Kandy is the one who can best help you. She can be your friend. At least come to meet her."

Astrid couldn't refuse, so she went to meet the board woman. Who turned out to be quite nice, once she got over the shock of meeting a basilisk. She agreed to have Astrid join their mission, but insisted on much more formal clothing such as a bra, panties, and a dress. Astrid didn't know about such superfluous things but had to trust the woman's human judgment. She chose a dress with lovely reptilian sequins that reminded her of scales; it was the only one she could really be comfortable in. MareAnn was not easy with it, because the sequins were magic, but let it be.

Thus it was that Astrid joined the Quest to eliminate the anti-pun virus. The dress turned out to be a devious asset, because whenever a sequin fell off it turned translucent, which for some reason made the man, Ease, freak out, and when the sequin was restored, it jumped them to a new location that might or might not be convenient. So it became quite an adventure. Along the way they added others to the Quest, including the machine Com Pewter, the girl in the tower Tiara, the long-haired man Mitch, and Art, an artist who was immune to poison. He promptly became Astrid's boyfriend, because he could kiss her and be with her without suffering, though he was careful not to meet her gaze; there were limits. His ambition was to paint portraits of beautiful women, especially her.

But most important of all, Kandy became Astrid's second and best friend. That truly sustained her. They managed to complete their mission with the help of Merge, a remarkable five-part woman, but still had some mopping up to do.

"And that is how I came to associate with these wonderful people," Astrid concluded. "I am indeed a basilisk, and my direct gaze is instant death, but I am comfortable in this group, and we accept each

other as we are.”

“That’s so romantic,” Ginger Goblin said.

“And remarkable,” Truman Troll added. “I am glad to have heard it. But who is your third best friend?”

“I have no idea,” Astrid confessed. “Nor what my mission in life is. I’m just trying to help these good folk accomplish their mission to exterminate the pun virus and restore Xanth to its natural state.”

“I am not quite finished here,” Pewter said. “Your narrative has not quite filled out the chapter. You must have left something out.”

“Oh!” Astrid exclaimed, surprised, and half a bulb flashed over her head.

“Our appreciation surprises you?” Truman asked.

“Speaking of Art and his Portraits reminded me,” Astrid said. “MareAnn said something about portraits that didn’t mean anything to me at the time, but now it is beginning to.”

“Portraits?” Ginger asked.

“MareAnn said that the Good Magician was in half a dither because though the Book of Lost Answers had been reassembled—I don’t know what that means, but I think it’s a sort of companion to the Book of Answers that is the huge musty tome he constantly pores over—there was an Answer left over and he didn’t know what to do with it.”

“Obviously it belongs in the Book of Answers, since it’s not lost,” Pewter said.

“Apparently not,” Astrid said. “The Book of Answers also has the Questions, but this one has no attached question. So it is the Question that is lost. That confuses, befuddles, and perplexes him. So he’s grumpy, and that annoys the Wives, who find him difficult enough to deal with already. That’s why they swap out every month, getting time to recover from his moods. They need to find the Question so that things can settle down to the normally irritating routine.”

“What is the Answer?” Ginger asked.

“Five Portraits.”

“Five Portraits?”

“Yes. That’s all. I just realized that there are five beautiful women in our party, and Art means to paint them all when there is pausing time. So those could be the Answer.”

“And what is the Question?” Truman asked.

“I don’t know. But doesn’t having the Answer evoke the Question, in human events? It must be hovering close by.”

The several assembled folk circled a somewhat haphazard glance. If the Question was near, they did not perceive it.

“We shall keep an eye out for a lost Question,” Tiara said. “With luck we’ll know it when we see it.”

It seemed that would have to do.

“Got it,” Pewter said, gratified.

“The Question?” Astrid asked.

“The lock. I have nulled it.” And with that he swung the barred gate open.

“Oh, we could kiss you!” Ginger said as the goblin girls stepped out.

“Kindly desist with your threats,” Pewter said. But he was too late; the three pretty girls kissed him on both ears and his nose.

“On with the exchange,” Truman said. “Then at last we can end the truce, which is becoming burdensome.”

“That’s right,” Ginger said. “You trolls can’t do a thing to us as long as the truce holds.” Then the

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